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SUBJECT: MEDIA PLAY: Sri Lanka Co-Chairs Meeting in Washington Draws Little Editorial Comment

REF: COLOMBO 271

¶11. (U) Summary. While media reaction to the statement Washington released after the 2/17 Sri Lanka co-chairs meeting was headline heavy, editorial comment was limited. All major English, Sinhala and Tamil Sri Lankan media outlets reported on the post-meeting statement with straightforward headlines. Election fever, particularly the emergence of a slate of candidates composed solely of Buddhist monks, (and supported by extremist nationalist party Jathika Hela Urumaya - formerly called Sihala Urumaya), occupied newspaper commentators. As a result, only one independent Tamil daily and the government-owned English daily offered commentary. Independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI commented (2/21), "...The international community is not going to be worried who wins the election. But, they expect those coming to power to establish lasting peace. This is the only way to obtain financial assistance from the international community." End Summary.

¶12. (U) All major English, Sinhala and Tamil Sri Lankan media outlets reported on the meeting outcome with straightforward headlines. Government-owned (and President Kumaratunga-controlled) English DAILY NEWS reported (2/19), "Donors will continue aid flow to Lanka," and its Tamil sister THINAKARAN elaborated (2/19), "Donor countries reaffirm USD 4.5 billion aid for SL - Washington Confab decides that the peace process should not be affected." Government-owned Sinhala daily DINAMINA echoed (2/19), "Donor countries decide to continue help for Sri Lanka." Government-owned Rupavahini Television reported (2/18), "Sri Lanka donor co-chairs say no situation has arisen in the island which would prevent the granting of aid," in English, Sinhala and Tamil broadcasts.

¶13. (U) Independent media outlets stressed that aid would continue, provided the peace process continues. Independent English DAILY MIRROR reported (2/19), "Donors affirm aid pledged - On condition peace process progresses." Independent Sinhala daily LANKADEEPA observed (2/19), "Disappointment over collapse of cohabitation; 450 billion aid only on progress of peace process," while independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI's lead headline comforted (2/19), "America and donor countries want peace talks resumed - assure continued humanitarian aid."

¶14. (U) Pro-LTTE media outlets were also straightforward in their reporting of the co-chairs statement. Under the headline (2/18), "Donors call for early return to Peace Talks," pro-LTTE website TAMILNET carried the entirety of the statement. Pro-LTTE Tamil daily SUDAR OLI reported (2/19), "'Assure free and peaceful election' - request to Sri Lankan leaders at the Washington Meeting."

¶15. (U) Election fever, particularly the emergence of a slate of candidates composed solely of Buddhist monks, (and supported by extremist nationalist party Jathika Hela Urumaya - formerly called Sihala Urumaya), occupied newspaper commentators. As a result, only one independent Tamil daily and the government-owned English daily offered commentary. Independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI commented (2/21), "...The international community is not going to be worried who wins the election. But, they expect those coming to power to establish lasting peace. This is the only way to obtain financial assistance from the international community."

----- Under the headline, "No peace means no financial assistance," independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI commented (2/21), "...The international community is not going to be worried who wins the election. But, they expect those coming to power to establish lasting peace. This is the only way to obtain financial assistance from the international community."

Editorial excerpts.

Peace talks have stalled since April last year and now we face an election as a result of the executive presidential

powers. In the meantime, donors to Sri Lanka met in Washington and have requested that the peace talks be resumed to establish permanent peace in the country. They have also informed that the financial assistance will be provided based on the progress of the talks. There's no point in granting financial assistance if there's no peace, as development cannot be undertaken if there's war. It is unfortunate that the humanitarian assistance meant for those affected by the war is on hold. Anyway, the donors had assured that the humanitarian assistance would continue.. The international community is not going to be worried who wins the election. But, they expect those coming to power to establish lasting peace. This is the only way to obtain financial assistance from the international community.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Election promises," independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI commented (2/23), "The US Deputy Secretary of State has spoken to the leaders of both main

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parties, and stressed the need for peace... Then only the country will be able to obtain the financial assistance from the international community for reconstruction and development."

Editorial excerpts.

With the election announcement, crossovers, violence, new alliances and election promises have started to come out. All the promises that are given on the election platform regarding peace, democracy, and human rights go with the wind after elections. At the last elections peace was the victor.. If the country wants to develop economically, peace is essential. There are accusations that the international community is involved in the internal affairs of our country. But, as a developing nation we need the support of the international community. The US Deputy Secretary of State has spoken to the leaders of both main

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parties, and stressed the need for peace. He has said that the war must not begin, but that peace should be established, and that the peace talks should continue. Then only the country will be able to obtain the financial assistance from the international community for reconstruction and development.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Peace prospects undimmed," Government-owned English DAILY NEWS commented (2/20), "In what could be considered a vote of confidence in Sri Lanka, the international community has, once again, decided not to hinder the aid flow to Sri Lanka, while re-expressing the prime condition that substantial aid will remain tied to significant progress in the peace process, which is, of course, at present in a state of partial paralysis..."

Editorial excerpts.
In what could be considered a vote of confidence in Sri Lanka, the international community has, once again, decided not to hinder the aid flow to Sri Lanka, while re-expressing the prime condition that substantial aid will remain tied to significant progress in the peace process, which is, of course, at present in a state of partial paralysis... Simultaneously almost, President Kumaratunga was quoted saying at a public function that a future government under her would in no way compel the LTTE or give it cause to get back to war. On the contrary, the LTTE would be encouraged to get into the democratic mainstream, through the working out of a political solution to the ethnic conflict. Thus has the donor community's faith in Sri Lanka been justified. While some mischievous elements have thought it best to play on public fears over a future return to hostilities, the President's words are proof that no such thing is on the cards. This is substantial evidence that the present peace will hold and that every effort would be made to negotiate a solution to the ethnic problem. However, it would be essential that the President receives a clear and unambiguous mandate to launch a fresh peace bid and to take Lanka along the development path...It is best that the country sees what is in store for it, as it weighs its options. The ceasefire is remaining largely unaffected but the ethnic conflict is still to be resolved. Every lost moment is a virtual victory for those opposing peace. The challenge consists in convincingly answering the LTTE's ISGA proposals. As long as the latter remains unanswered, the Lankan State could be faulted as the party which is dragging its feet...It is only fair that if the President is willing to work for peace she be afforded an opportunity to do so. Meanwhile, political duplicity should be shunned by all relevant parties to the conflict.

End editorial excerpts.

